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SUBJECT: LAO HMONG: THAI MILITARY PROMISES FIRST
INFORMATION ON PETCHABUN GROUP

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[1](#)B. (B) BANGKOK 1170 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Senior Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTARF) officials have offered new transparency on the 6,000 remaining Lao Hmong at the army-run camp in Petchabun province. In separate meetings with Ambassador and DCM, newly-appointed Supreme Commander General Songkitti Jaggabartra and Chief of Joint Staff General Ratchakrit Kanchanawat both promised more information on the on-going repatriations and associated vetting process. For the first time, they offered to provide a list of those in the camp and their status in the screening process. Military officials did not object to a IOM-proposed project which would insert the organization as a de facto third party monitor into the return process now underway for Lao Hmong. The RTARF still believes Lao military counterparts will object to a UNHCR role, however.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Comment: The new transparency by the Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTARF) on the Lao Hmong at Petchabun (if it lasts) is as welcome as it is unexpected. The UNHCR Executive Committee meetings are presently being held in Geneva, and it is possible that in preparation civilian RTG agencies succeeded in wresting some policy control from the military. (The RTG has been criticized at past editions of the ExCom for their handling of the vulnerable group.) Also likely contributing is the complete turn-over in people responsible for the issue: Generals Songkitti and Ratchakrit both just assumed their positions in the annual October military reshuffle, and Ambassador has discussed the Lao Hmong issue with new Prime and Foreign Ministers in the past few weeks. Once details on the 6,000 remaining Lao Hmong at Petchabun are received, post will advocate with the RTG for UNHCR participation in a review of the cases in preparation for possible future referrals for resettlement in the U.S. and other countries. End Summary and Comment.

Songkitti - Ambassador: working on transparency

[1](#)3. (C) Ambassador used the opportunity of his October 7 courtesy call on new RTARF Supreme Commander General Songkitti Jaggabartra to raise the issue of the Hmon and push for more transparency. The Supreme Commander promised to share more information regarding RTG screening completed at the army-run camp at Petchabun. The Thai military, National Security Council, and Ministries of Foreign Affairs and the Interior were working to develop a more transparent screening process that Songkitti hoped would ease concern in the international community and the U.S. Congress over the repatriation of Hmong to Laos.

14. (C) Songkitti believed that his personal relationships with leading Lao military leaders could lead to a more flexible stance by the Lao government. The Supreme Commander suggested his discussions with the Lao could lead to initiatives targeted to improve the lives of Hmong returnees to Laos and provide for a situation on the ground in Laos that would entice more Hmong to return voluntarily to Laos. Projects should focus on providing better housing, educational opportunities, employment options, and social services to the Hmong, Songkitti said. These focus areas were key, as the Lao government needed to provide for better integration into society for the Hmong. International aid, joint development activities, and Royal Project initiatives were avenues to implement his ideas, Songkitti told the Ambassador.

15. (C) Songkitti told the Ambassador that he could not predict Lao government reaction to possible international and US assistance to Hmong returnees, but he predicted that the establishment of a U.S. Defense Attache in Vientiane would help to facilitate a more accommodative stance on the Hmong issue by the Lao government.

Ratchakrit - DCM: we'll provide a list

16. (SBU) In a follow-up meeting on October 8, DCM and RefCoord met with newly promoted RTARF Chief of Joint Staff General Ratchakrit Kanchanawat similarly to urge greater transparency in the treatment of the 6,000 remaining Lao Hmong at Petchabun. The encounter, which featured an audio-visual briefing on the issue before a retinue of 30

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army officers, produced an apparent breakthrough. For the first time, the Thai military promised a list of all the Lao Hmong who were in the camp during the RTARF's November 2007 - January 2008 registration. In addition, Ratchakrit committed to providing information on the results of the camp-level screening process that was completed in March 2008. The names of Hmong identified by the RTG's internal vetting as being unable to return to Laos will be provided, opening for the first time a window into the status of the Petchabun group.

17. (SBU) As a down payment on the commitment, the Thai provided a list of names of the most recent (August 28) movement of 128 Hmong returned to Laos in the on-going repatriation process. To date, there have been a total of 1,673 people repatriated in eight movements. RTARF Border Division head Lieutenant General Nipat Thonglek, head of the RTG delegation to the bilateral border working group with the Government of Laos (GOL), described a Sept. 11th visit to Ban Pha Lak in Laos where about 60 families from Petchabun have been resettled. According to General Nipat, "they are very happy to be back." In a video interview that was part of the audio-visual presentation, several adult Hmong returnees carefully echoed the sentiment in Thai, and a classroom scene showed apparently satisfied Hmong children. (Note: the Ban Pha Lak village has been constructed by the GOL for returnees without any other place to go. The RTG has not visited any of the home villages where the majority of Petchabun Hmong are resettled.) According to Nipat, the next voluntary repatriation of an as-yet undetermined number of Hmong is scheduled for the end of October. The Thai promised to provide the names of returnees when available.

18. (SBU) DCM also advocated for an independent monitor in the Lao Hmong repatriation process currently underway to further improve transparency. Nipat stated that Thai military "had no objection" to a proposed IOM project that provides medical and nutritional assistance to voluntary returnees staged at a nearby army barracks, and onward transportation to the Lao border. DCM noted that the Laotian MFA had shown increased flexibility by offering UNHCR an invitation to visit Ban Pha Lak return site, and suggested that RTG now had the policy space to provide UNHCR access to the returnees

temporarily sequestered at the army barracks. (UNHCR is not pushing for access directly to Petchabun camp, concerned that their presence would spur rumors of an impending large-scale third country resettlement program.) Nipat described his Lao military counterparts in the bilateral border committee as still opposed to any UNHCR involvement in the return process. However, Nipat suggested that a visit by the RTG Prime Minister to Vientiane "may help bring more flexibility" on the Lao side.

19. (SBU) Asked about plans for those Hmong at Petchabun identified by the RTG as not able to return to Laos, Ratchakrit quickly responded: "We will give them to you - just like at Wat Tham Krabok!" (Note: in 2004-2005, the U.S. resettled about 15,000 Lao Hmong who had congregated at the temple in central Thailand.) DCM noted in return that the US did not plan a group resettlement program as was done at Wat Tham Krabok, but would consider individual cases for refugee resettlement - if they were interviewed and referred by UNHCR.

JOHN